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AUTHOR Thomas, Franklin A.
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ABSTRACT

The Joint Center for Political Studies aims to increase black America's ability to participate fully and effectively in the governance of society. While significant progress has been made since 1970, recent evidence shows that gains are deteriorating and that disturbing demographic trends are changing the social structure of the nation. This speech focuses on trends in two areas: population and policy. The nation's youth population is shrinking and will consist increasingly of minorities. Blacks will soon comprise 20 percent of the work force. Despite certain advances in the education of minorities, such as lower high school drop-out rates, college attendance for blacks has declined in the past 10 years. Two policy trends are noted: (1) receding federal commitment to equal educational opportunity, and (2) states launching initiatives to improve school performance. This latter trend, which has its valuable aspects, also has the effect of diminishing an already shrinking pool of black elementary and secondary school teachers who provide important role models for black children. This speech concludes that it is the burden of the Joint Center and others to challenge minority youth constructively to encourage them to higher achievement. (LHW)

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# The New Demographics

by Franklin A. Thomas

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Franklin A. Thomas is president of the Ford Foundation. He delivered the following remarks at the ninth annual dinner of the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D.C., on March 26, 1986.

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445 June 1986

I am very happy to join you in celebrating another excellent year in the life of the Joint Center for Political Studies. The center's success has flowed from the high quality of its work and from Eddie Williams' outstanding leadership. We at the Ford Foundation take continuing pride in recalling that our support in 1970 helped launch the center on its way to a distinguished and productive career.

We have traveled a long road together over the years. In 1970, the door to elected office for blacks had been pushed open only five years earlier by the Voting Rights Act. The number of black elected officials, though growing, was very small, and the Joint Center was created to buttress that small group.

Between 1970 and 1981, the center was the most important resource and information center for black elected officials. The center gave them an opportunity to get to know each other and to learn from and support each other. For many of those political pioneers, the lonely experience of being the first black on a city council or in a state legislature became less difficult because the Joint Center was there.

By working closely with black elected officials, the center gained the credibility it needed to expand into a major national policy research center that analyzes political and policy debates in which blacks have a special stake. Today the center is the nation's premier institution for the study of issues affecting

black Americans. Its basic mission, however, has never changed: "to increase black America's ability to participate fully and effectively in the governance of our society."

Recognizing that issues affecting black Americans have an impact on every American, the center has broadened its constituency to include public- and private-sector leaders throughout the nation, regardless of race or ethnicity.

In its brief history, the Joint Center has marked the progress of black Americans in reaching for full participation in American life. From the handful of public officials in 1970, the number of black elected officials is now over 6,000. And though that still leaves a long road ahead, it is noteworthy progress. The Joint Center also has reported on the growth of a black middle class, one that is increasingly moving out of the central city and achieving the promise of a better life.

Alongside these trends has been the increasing integration of the nation's public schools and the narrowing of the education gap between blacks and whites. In 1950 only a quarter of black youths were graduating from high school, an incredible waste of human resources. By the late 1970s, three-quarters of black youths were graduating.

Today we face new educational challenges. Although more black youths are graduating from high school, serious gaps remain between white and nonwhite students in educational achievement. There is also alarming evidence of a recent deterioration in the educational gains of blacks.

Moreover, the schools are not adequately preparing minority youngsters to meet the demands of the labor market. In the background of these educational deficiencies are new demographic trends that are changing the social structure of the nation.

## A Shrinking Youth Population

Those changes are complex, but their direction and magnitude are revealed in a few simple facts:

— After a period of sustained growth, the nation's youth population is shrinking. Between 1975 and 1995 the number of young people aged sixteen to twenty-four is expected to decline from 35 million to 29 million or from 23 percent to 15 percent of the population.

— This smaller youth cohort will consist increasingly of black and other minority youngsters. In 1950 less than 15 percent of those eighteen and under were minority; today the figure is 36 percent and growing.

— The new demographics show that black Americans, who currently make up 11 percent of the work force, will account for almost one-fifth of all labor-force entrants in the years ahead. The nation will have fewer youngsters than in the past, and more of them will be black and brown.

Those facts have important implications for nearly all our major institutions, among them the military and the Social Security system. The nation's rapidly aging white middle class will draw its retirement income from an increasingly black and Hispanic work force. The nation's defense will depend increasingly on blacks and browns in uniform. The importance of these youths to our freedom and to our economic health will increase sharply even as their total numbers decline.

And that brings us face to face with the question of education. For generations of Americans, rich and poor, education has been the gateway to the future, the key that has unlocked the door between the dreams of the present and the realities of tomorrow. Today, the new demographics show, the challenge to

our educational system has never been greater.

How well are black youths being prepared to assume a greater share of responsibility for the nation's future, particularly when this future rests on a more technologically sophisticated economy? The facts, I'm afraid, are discouraging:

— At 75 percent, the black graduation rate is still ten points below that of whites. Black dropout rates are reported to be running at 50 percent or more in many inner-city schools.

— The average black seventeen-year-old reads at the same level as the average white thirteen-year-old, a full four-year lag.

— Higher high school graduation rates have not translated into greater college attendance. Indeed, college attendance for blacks has declined in the past ten years.

For blacks who graduate from high school, the opportunity to attend a first-rate college or university is diminished by their educational deficits, by a lack of funds for tuition, and by what appears to be a declining interest among colleges and universities in affirmative action and student diversity. As a result, the proportion of black high school graduates going to college is steadily declining, from 34 percent in 1976 to 27 percent in 1983. The historically black colleges are struggling to survive and thus do not provide the same option for black students as in the past. Instead, college-bound blacks are enrolling disproportionately in community colleges and in less selective, low-cost, four-year institutions.

Black college students are also more likely than others to drop out before attaining their degrees. By the time students are ready to attend graduate school, the flow of minorities through the educational pipeline has been reduced to a trickle.

This problem will not be easily solved, but the situation is far from hopeless. We have learned a great deal from educational research about how to intervene in the pipeline and where. We know that:

— Participation in preschool education programs, like Head Start, produces improvements in later school achievement.

— Compensatory education programs, providing extra help in basic skills to children from poor families, improve those youngsters' skills significantly.

— Help with homework, role models to provide encouragement, summer school and summer jobs, information about jobs and higher education, and basic skills training — all increase the likelihood that youngsters from poor families will stay in school and go on to some form of higher education.

— Concerned parents who value education and provide strong direction for their children can significantly improve their children's educational achievement.

— Strong instructional leadership, an academically focused curriculum, high standards, and an environment that is secure also contribute to student achievement.

—Student aid and affirmative action programs increase the likelihood that black and other minorities can and will attend college.

**Disturbing Policy Trends**

Knowledge of what works, however, is not enough. We also need the vision and will to apply these and other lessons in ways that will effectively serve all of our students — and thereby the most precious goals of our society as a whole. In this regard, two recent policy trends are disturbing.

First is the receding federal commitment to equal educational opportunity.

Since the Brown case in 1954, the federal government has played an essential role in redressing educational inequities for blacks and other minorities. The commitment to equal educational opportunity for all children from all economic backgrounds has provided a fundamental rationale for federal involvement in what is still principally a state and local responsibility. Federally supported compensatory education programs provided at an early age do work. Indeed, many of the gains made by black youths in recent years have been the result of these programs. Yet, rather than expand these programs to serve the increasing number of those eligible, federal support for them has been level for the past few years. Their future support is threatened by the need to reduce the federal deficit. This approach to deficit reduction is shortsighted and threatens to weaken the nation in the long run.

At the other end of the educational pipeline, federal support for student aid programs has made it possible for many blacks to attend college. Here again, actual and threatened reductions in support for such programs put these gains at risk.

Finally, despite the legacy of the Brown decision, the federal government has become less willing to intervene through the courts on behalf of black and other minority students to redress discriminatory educational practices. This, too, reduces chances to improve the education of the new youth cohort.

The second trend is that many states are launching initiatives to improve school performance. Undertaken in the wake of a variety of studies underscoring our educational crisis, these efforts have largely focused on instituting minimum requirements for teachers and students as measured by standardized tests. State efforts to encourage excellence should be applauded, but attention must also be paid

to preparing students adequately for these new testing hurdles. It also is not enough that schools prepare most of their students to pass a test of minimum competence. Students in the bottom quadrant must also be helped to meet the testing challenge.

Unfortunately, the pool of black elementary and secondary school teachers — those who provide critically important role models for black youths at an early age — is small and shrinking. Currently, blacks make up approximately 12 percent of the total teaching force; it is estimated that by 1990 they will constitute only 5 percent. The reasons for this decline are many, ranging from retirements, low teacher salaries, changing career patterns, and a drop in the number of blacks pursuing degrees in education. The potential impact of some of the new competency testing for teachers makes the picture bleaker still.

Tests are a blunt instrument. They do not measure those intangible qualities of dedication, patience, and even love that each of us can remember about teachers who left their mark on us. How to strike a fair and realistic balance between tangible and intangible measures of teacher competence is a responsibility that we must meet.

Finally, the challenge of the new demographics extends to the youth of coming generations. I sincerely believe that when challenged and encouraged, they will respond. Examples abound. Eugene Lang, a self-made New York businessman, called upon a group of inner-city sixth-graders to complete high school. He said that if they did, he would guarantee their college tuition. All but four of the fifty-two remaining in New York are now in the eleventh grade — a remarkable achievement in light of inner-city dropout rates. The New York City Volunteer Corps puts youth to work serving their communities for a

stipend of $80 a week and an additional sum for college tuition if they complete six months to a year of service. Youths from disadvantaged communities are as eager to participate as those from middle-class or affluent communities.

The burden on us, then, is to challenge our youth constructively and creatively, to encourage them to higher achievement. Over the coming years we will look to the Joint Center and others to help show us the way. The need is urgent. The high school class of the year 2000 will soon enter the first grade. We must act for the sake of this new generation, and, as the new demographics suggest, for our own sake as well.

There is no easy road before us. There is no instant cure for these ills. Instead, it will take thoughtful action, patiently sustained, sensitively evaluated, and rooted in an understanding that when we help our neighbors we help ourselves. That awareness should help light our way.